

What Is Grammar?

An Inquiry-Based Model for Thinking and Talking About Grammars in a College Writing Course

Crossing the Bridge: How Do We Prepare Students for Mainstream College Work?
CUNY Conference on Best Practices in Reading and Writing Instruction
Laguardia Community College
November 10, 2012

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Today's Presentation

Three things:

- "Grammar", error and the college writing course
- Apparent divide between Comp/Rhet theory and pedagogy
- Inability of Comp/Rhet to change how student writers are perceived

How are these three things related?

Background

Amazing research done

Lots of things have been learned

And yet: the dominant message at the university and even for many writing instructors is "students can't write"!

Why is this still the dominant message?

Key Question

How is it possible that after all of these years and all of this research, not only is "students can't write" the dominant message/idea at some universities but that many writing instructors approach the teaching of writing with this perspective and also believe that error--it's presence and how to address it--are central to the college writing course?

Shifting the perspective

We need to shift the perspective on and understanding of what it means to be able to write. One way is by dismantling shibboleths, one of which is this issue/question of what error is as a phenomenon and how grammar is understood and defined.

What Is Grammar?

Descriptive

Prescriptive

Hartwell, "Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar" is the most widely distributed article in the field of comp/rhet

Mina Shaughnessey's Errors and Expectations had profound impact

A lot of work done in the 70s and early 80s on understanding error (first issue of JBW devoted to error)

What is Grammar?

To a large extent, prescriptive grammar is about norming the language around the SWE dialect. Linguist John McWhorter comments that linguistic bias is one of the last acceptable forms of discrimination in American society.

Need to differentiate between grammar and usage

Furthermore, I think writing instructors can do a better job at simplifying what students need to know about prescriptive grammar by teaching it as a writer's grammar rather than as a teacher's grammar

What Is Grammar?

And yet: prescriptive grammar is still taught in the college writing course and instructors spend a lot of time and ink marking and commenting on errors and students consistently report that one of the major issues that they have to work on is "bad grammar"

Using Descriptive Grammar as the Model

Any message that can be clearly communicated has perfect grammar. It may not adhere to the guidelines of SWE grammar and usage, however it is functional and, I would like to argue, actually more than that: miraculous, perfect, calling on cognitive processes and functions that are super complex and beyond description by most "educated" individuals.

Question

What happens when you tell students that they have perfect grammar?

Question

What happens if you approach the college writing course as an advanced rather than basic grammar course or one that need not be concerned with grammar because our students already know more than we could teach them about grammar?

Some profound changes take place

Becomes a course about reading

Becomes a course about genres

Becomes a course about college writing (whatever that means)

Course moves from a focus on:

correctness to language

prescription to interpretation

what students don't know (deficit model) to what they do know (surplus model)

instruction to immersion

performance to rehearsal

Sample In-Class Group Work Exercise

What Is Grammar?

Group Work Assignment

1. Choose a transcriber
2. Choose a presenter
3. First, each group member will read aloud his/her personal or connotative/colloquial definition of grammar.
4. Based on these definitions, please develop ONE overall connotative definition based on the group definitions.
5. Second, each group member will read aloud his/her dictionary or denotative definition of grammar.

In-Class Group Work, cont'd

6. Based on these definitions, please develop ONE overall connotative definition based on the group definitions.

7. We read two essays about the topic of grammar, “Grammar” by Sandy Chung and Geoff Pullman, and “What Is ‘Correct’ Language?” by Edward Finnegan. Please make a list of the three to five key points made in each essay. How similar or dissimilar were these essays? Why?

8. Were there any words or ideas that you did not understand in either one of the essays? Please make a note of these.

9. Finally, as a group, develop three discussion questions for the class about the topic of grammar and what your group is interested in knowing about the topic.

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